Handling multilingualism in secondary education

Kistemaker, M.; Broeder, P.; van Wijk, C.

Published in:
Proceedings of Inaugural European Conference on Language Learning "Shifting Paradigms

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Handling multilingualism in secondary education: A teachers' perspective

Mariska Kistemaker, Peter Broeder, Carel van Wijk

Tilburg University, Netherlands

0212

The European Conference on Language Learning 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

'Literacy' in terms of reading and understanding texts is essential for success at school. The increasing linguistic diversity in Dutch schools confronts teachers with many challenges. How do they perceive, manage, and evaluate this situation with respect to the teaching of literacy?
In order to answer that question, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 230 secondary school teachers in North Brabant, a province in the South of the Netherlands. The participants were differentiated equally by three criteria: (1) type of education (vocational or preparatory scientific education), (2) school subject (Dutch, modern languages or other text-based subjects) and (3) teaching experience (<12.5 or >12.5 years). Questions concerned the perception of multilingualism in class, the background of students and practical issues for the lesson.
Results are organized along three topics. In each section, special attention is given to the moderating role of the three criteria mentioned above. The first topic is a descriptive one, the latter two are didactical. (1) How many children do actually have a multilingual background, and which home languages are represented within the classroom? (2) Which challenges do arise from multilingualism in class, and is there a connection between problems with literacy and the multilingual context? (3) Do teachers feel well prepared through (preliminary) schooling and institutional support? Which types of additional support do they consider as necessary?
In the conclusion, consequences are discussed for the development of teachers' education, training and external support.

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Multilingualism in the classroom confronts teachers with many challenges. A recurrent observation is that teachers of multilingual classes have more problems than teachers of mainly monolingual classes. In order to respond adequately to the challenges encountered in teaching multilingual classrooms, teachers should be prepared for these challenges in teacher training (or receive remedial training on the subject if they are already teaching), and be given adequate supporting facilities. Therefore, knowledge on the origins of the perceived problems is needed. What is the nature of the challenges and problems teachers are confronted with?

The present study investigates the teachers' perception and evaluation of multilingual classrooms at secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 230 secondary school teachers from two different school types in North Brabant, a province in the South of the Netherlands. They were asked about their students' linguistic backgrounds, about their perception of challenges and problems encountered in teaching multilingual classrooms, about the preparation and support and other facilities that would be needed to handle these challenges.

1.2 Secondary schooling in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, children enter one of three types of secondary education at the age of 12: pre-vocational education (VMBO), senior general secondary education (HAVO) or pre-university education (VWO). These types differ with respect to the content and complexity of their curricula and offer different possibilities for further education: these are senior secondary vocational education (MBO) for VMBO, higher professional education (HBO) for HAVO, and university (WO) for VWO. (For terminology, see Broekhof, 1995; Ministry of Education, 2007). The majority of children attend pre-vocational schools (about 54%); the others more or less evenly enter senior general secondary education (about 25%) or pre-university schools (about 22%). The present study focuses on the school types at both ends of the spectrum (VMBO and VWO).

1.3 Research Questions

Three research questions were formulated with respect to the teaching of multilingual classrooms.

Question 1: How many children in your classes do actually have a multilingual background, and which home languages are represented within the classroom?
Question 2: What are the challenges arising from multilingualism in the classroom?
Question 3: Have teachers been properly prepared for these challenges during their studies? Which types of additional support do they consider necessary?

2 Methods

2.1 Questionnaire

Interviews were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire. Four topics were addressed.

Background information. Informants were asked about their age, gender, work experience, and affiliation (school type and school subject taught).

Multilingualism in class. Informants reported on their experiences teaching multilingual classes. Teachers were asked to estimate the degree of multilingualism in their classes in two ways: first, to give an estimation of the percentage of students that speak languages other than Dutch at home; second, to name up to three languages their multilingual students speak at home. Besides this, the teachers were asked to report on the general home situation of their students. They were free in their interpretation of the home situation.

Challenges and problems. Informants were asked about the biggest challenges and problems they experience when teaching in a multilingual setting.

Preparation and support. Informants indicated any preliminary preparation they might have had for teaching in multilingual classes. Besides this, they reflected on different types of support that they would consider necessary and helpful.

2.2 Informants

In all, 230 teachers participated; 122 men and 108 women. One half worked at schools for pre-vocational education (VMBO), the other half at schools for pre-university education (VWO). Half of them taught Dutch (49%), 20 percent taught a modern language (such as English, French or German) or a classical language (Latin or Greek) and 32 percent taught non-language subjects (such as history, mathematics or sports). Their ages ranged from 19 to 64 with an average of 44.1 (SD=12.46) and did not differ for gender, school type, or the school subject the teachers taught (all F's<1.63, p>.20).

The work experience of the teachers ranged from six months to 42 years with an average of 16.6 years (SD=11.91). Teachers were split into two groups: those whose experience was 12.5 years or less (n=112), and those whose experience was 13 years or more (n=118). Work experience differed by gender (F(1,218)=12.91, p<.001, η^2=.056) and school subject (F(2,218)=6.41, p<.005, η^2=.056). The women had over six years less experience than the men (14.1 versus 20.1). Teachers of a non-language subject had about six years less experience than their language colleagues (12.9 versus 18.5). The school type did not show any differences (F(1,218)=.61, p =.44).

2.3 Procedure

The teachers were interviewed by university students. Each student acting as interviewer recruited two teachers: one from a pre-vocational school (VMBO) and one from a pre-university school (VWO). The interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed literally. Subsequently, the transcripts of the interviews were coded for further analysis. During the analysis, special attention was given to the moderating

role of the school type. Besides this, the teacher's school subject, their work experience and gender were taken into consideration.

3 Results

3.1 Multilingualism in class

Experience with teaching multilingual classes was reported by 69 percent of the teachers. There was no association with school type ($\chi^2(1)=0.89$, $p=.35$). On average, teachers estimated that one in six students has a multilingual background (16.8%; $SD=22.12$). Their estimates ranged from 0 to 100 percent. Estimates differed between school types ($F(1,155)=11.58$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.070$). Pre-vocational school teachers reported a much higher estimate of multilingualism than pre-university education teachers (22.5% versus 9.3%).

Home language background

The teachers were also asked to name up to three languages their students speak at home in addition to Dutch. In all, 45 different languages were reported. Table 1 gives an overview of the 10 most frequently mentioned languages.

Table 1. Top ten of the languages mentioned by teachers

Languages	Absolute number
Moroccan-Arabic/Berber	184
Turkish	146
English	37
Chinese	32
Afghan	25
French	15
German	15
Polish	14
Kurdish	13
Papiamento	12

The languages most used at home in addition to Dutch were (Moroccan)-Arabic or Berber (together making up 27%) and Turkish (21%). Of the other 52 percent, the most reported home languages were English (5%), Chinese (5%), and Afghan (4%). Only six percent of the teachers reported that among their students no other languages were spoken at home instead of or in addition to Dutch. Five percent named one foreign language, 22 percent named two, and 67 percent three languages. An association with school type was found ($\chi^2(3)=8.65$, $p<.05$). At pre-university schools, more teachers named three languages than at pre-vocational schools (70% versus 65%), whereas at pre-vocational schools more teachers named two languages than at pre-university schools (28% versus 15%).

The languages reported by the teachers were classified as either Western (Germanic, Romance and Slavic languages) or non-western (Creole, Afro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Iranian languages, and other language families). Based on this classification, the sample was divided into four groups of teachers: Teachers that reported having only Dutch-speaking students in their classes, Dutch speaking students and students

speaking other western languages, Dutch speaking students and students speaking non-western languages, and students speaking Dutch plus students speaking both western and non-western languages. Table 2 presents the distribution over these four teachers' groups. There was some difference between school types ($\chi^2(3)=6.90$, $p=.08$). However, in both cases the vast majority (>85%) reported having students speaking non-western languages at home.

Table 2. Teachers reporting on four degrees of multilingualism in relation with school type (in percentages)

	Pre-vocational (n=116)	Pre-university (n=114)	Over all (n=230)
Only Dutch	3.4	8.8	6.1
Dutch + western	2.6	4.4	3.5
Dutch + non-western	62.9	47.4	55.2
Dutch + western and non-western	31.0	39.5	35.2

A first idea about the home situation of students was given by 181 teachers. They interpreted the home situation in three different ways: in terms of ethnic background, socio-economic background and of family background. No difference was found for school type ($\chi^2(1)=3.60$, $p=.17$). Table 3 presents the distribution over these aspects in relation to school type.

Table 3. Home situation in relation to school type (in percentages)

	Pre-vocational (n=92)	Pre-university (n=89)	Over all (n=181)
Ethnic background	62.0	55.1	58.6
Socio-economic background	23.9	36.0	29.8
Family background	14.1	9.0	11.6

Ethnic background

More than half of the informants (59%) associated home situation with the ethnic background of students. Answers that referred to ethnic background included all references to language, birth place, cultural diversity or nationality, immigrant status and the distinction "black/white" or "autochthonous/allochthonous" students. In all cases, these subcategories were used in order to make a distinction into two groups.

Most of the teachers made a distinction on the basis of autochthonous/ allochthonous students. About half of this group reported that most of their students are of autochthonous Dutch origin. The other half reported mixed classes (autochthonous and allochthonous students). In some cases, the estimates included an either negative or positive evaluation of the students.

Teacher van Veen, for example, (male Dutch teacher, pre-university school, and 56 years old) related the allochthonous background of the students to a lower social class.

> Approximately 60 percent have an allochthonous background and are increasingly from lower social classes.
>
> *Ongeveer 60 percent [zijn] van allochtone afkomst, in toenemende mate uit lage sociale klassen.*

Teacher Jong (male Dutch teacher, pre-vocational school, and 58 years old) pointed to language problems of non-western students:

> Many students have a non-western background and consequently have language difficulties.
>
> *[We hebben] veel leerlingen met een niet-westerse achtergrond die daardoor moeite hebben met de taal.*

With regard to the positive evaluations, teachers emphasized the high level of education, the higher social class and the stability of many immigrant families. Teacher Dijk (female Dutch teacher, pre-university school, and 56 years old) reported on the high motivation of certain groups of students.

> Students with an Afghan background are strongly motivated by their parents and score high grades. The Turkish children are always highly motivated too and do their best to get good grades.
>
> *De kinderen van Afghaanse afkomst worden erg gestimuleerd van thuis uit en halen graag een hoog diploma. De Turkse kinderen zijn ook altijd erg gemotiveerd en doen hun best om een goede opleiding te halen.*

Socio-economic background

About 30 percent of the teachers referred to the socio-economic background of the students' families. Socio-economic background was frequently mentioned in connection with profession, income, social background, or educational status of the family. Teachers mentioned students' backgrounds in terms of lower, middle or higher socio-economic status. With regard to the profession of the parents, teachers named a variety of parents' professions being represented in class, ranging from farming families all the way up to managing directors. When teachers referred to the income of the parents, their estimates were quite high. The estimates with regard to the social background were more diverse. Most of the teachers that referred to the social milieu referred to a mix of higher and lower social milieus in class. The answers that included information on the educational status of the students' parents ranged from classes with mainly lower or mainly higher educational backgrounds to classes with a mix of educational backgrounds.

Family background

Twelve percent of the informants associated students' home situation with family background. It was addressed in terms of the parent's marital status and the number of sisters and brothers. Most of the teachers emphasized that many of their students' parents are separated without specifying the backgrounds of these students. By contrast, teachers often emphasized the stability of the home situation and the high number of sisters and brothers in the case of multilingual students.

3.2 Challenges and problems

Four out of five teachers reported challenges encountered in teaching multilingual classes. These challenges were classified as challenges for students, challenges for teachers and challenges for both. There was a difference between the two school types ($\chi^2(2)=7.93$, $p<.05$). Table 4 shows the distribution of the challenges in relation to school type.

Table 4. Distribution of challenges in relation to school type (in percentages)

	Pre-vocational (n=100)		Pre-university (n=92)	
Challenges for students:		42.0		62.0
mastering functional language skills	25.0		39.1	
understanding texts	2.0		7.6	
passing final exam	6.0		6.5	
mastering adequate vocabulary	9.0		8.7	
Challenges for teachers:		49.0		33.7
being comprehensible to student	18.0		12.0	
motivating students	17.0		13.0	
being aware of differences	14.0		8.7	
Challenges for both students + teachers:		9.0		4.3
mutual understanding	9.0		4.3	

Challenges for students

In pre-university education, more challenges for students were perceived (62 versus 42%). Students' challenges concerned functional linguistic skills, the mastery of adequate vocabulary, the understanding of texts, and passing the final exam. Most teachers mentioned challenges encountered by students in mastering functional linguistic skills. These skills comprise the language skills that are needed to be able to handle everyday situations. Thus, teachers mentioned difficulties students had filling out housing subsidy forms or understanding the package inserts that come with medicines. This category also included problems with Dutch grammar. One pre-university teacher (male Dutch teacher, 31 years old) illustrated this with the opaque gender distinction in the (fe)male article 'de' (*the*), the neuter article 'het' (*the*) and, the demonstrative 'die' (*that*). The frequent error 'die meisje' (*that girl*) which should be 'het meisje' in Dutch.

> How to teach the difference between 'de' and 'het'? There are no specific rules governing the use so you need a feel for the language in order to learn that properly and not say things like "Die meisje".
>
> *Het verschil aanleren tussen 'de' en 'het'. Er zijn geen duidelijke regels aan verbonden dus je moet een taalgevoel hebben om dat goed te kunnen leren: Die meisje.*

With regard to the mastery of adequate vocabulary, many teachers emphasized problems multilingual students had understanding words. Van der Aeck (female history teacher, pre-university school, and 45 years old) reported that these children need more attention:

> I help multilingual children a lot, help them understand words and sentences, because they can't do that on their own.
>
> *Meertalige kinderen help ik veel met het leren begrijpen van woorden en zinnen, omdat hun dat zelf niet lukt.*

Van Loo (male Biology teacher, pre-vocational school, and 20 years old) reported problems students had following her course:

> The problem is that students have to focus on more than one language, and that they do not understand words that we consider normal. If in biology you're talking about an oak for instance, they have no idea what that is.

> *Dat leerlingen zich op meer talen moeten focussen, dat woorden die we in het Nederlands als normaal beschouwen niet worden begrepen. Bijvoorbeeld als je het bij biologie over een eik hebt dat ze niet weten wat dat is.*

Next to the understanding of words and the mastery of functional language skills, the understanding and interpretation of texts poses serious challenges for multilingual students. Teacher van de Borg (female Dutch teacher, pre-vocational school, and 24 years old) described the problems as follows:

> Children of allochthonous origin tend to read past things, miss things when they are reading or interpret things in a different way.
>
> *Kinderen van allochtone afkomst lezen vaak over dingen heen of interpreteren dingen anders.*

Teacher Kerkhoff (male Dutch teacher, pre-university school, and 56 years old) explained the origin of these problems:

> [The challenge is] to get them, non-native speakers in particular, to let go of their fear of texts, to learn to handle the machine that a text actually is.
>
> *Tekstangst wegwerken, om te leren gaan met de machine die een tekst is, vooral bij niet moedertaalsprekers.*

Finally, passing the final exam also poses challenges for students. Teachers reported problems students have with specific types of questions or tasks formulated in exams.

Challenges for teachers

In pre-vocational education, more challenges for teachers were perceived (49% versus 34%). These included being comprehensible to students, motivating students or being aware of differences. Some teachers mentioned that they use visual or other non-verbal aids in order to make themselves understood. Another teacher emphasized that he repeats things that are important to make sure that everybody understands them. With regard to their own use of language, teachers are uncertain about whether they succeed in expressing themselves at an appropriate level, as teacher Snitjer (male Math teacher, pre-university school, and 49 years old) specified:

> [The biggest challenge is] to use language in a way that does not impoverish it, but that is quite clear nevertheless.
>
> *Taal zo te gebruiken, dat het niet verarmt maar toch heel duidelijk is.*

Some informants reported difficulties keeping the students interested, motivated and concentrated. Some teachers report that many students are not interested in reading classical literature such as poems or that they are not motivated to do the tasks the teacher sets them. The last of the teachers' challenges, being aware of differences, mainly concerned cultural differences, differences between students' performance and social differences.

Challenges for students and teachers

Some teachers (9% pre-vocational and 4% pre-university) reported on challenges for both, for students and teachers alike. Such challenges mainly concerned mutual understanding and awareness of cultural differences. Several teachers reported problems with the power relationship between themselves as teachers and certain students. Thus, one female teacher explained that some students are not used to female authority and do not accept her as a teacher. Besides this, teachers perceived challenges with regard to the creation of a sense of group identity in class. The use of Dutch in class in order to include the whole class in a conversation was part of this category.

To sum it up, the challenges for students mainly concern language skills, whereas the challenges for teachers also comprise aspects of attitude and intercultural differences. The third category of mutual understanding comprises aspects of group dynamics and communication that are essential for the learning process in class.

3.3 Preparation and support

Only one third of the teachers reported having received some form of preparation during their studies regarding challenges involved in multilingualism in class. For Dutch teachers, the percentage was higher than for their colleagues (43 versus 13%; $\chi^2(2)=24.56$, $p<.001$). Teachers with more extensive work experience reported less preparation (14 versus 42.9%; $\chi^2(1)=24.56$, $p<.001$). Women reported more preparation than men (39 versus 18%; $\chi^2(1)=12.41$, $p<.001$). School type did not show a significant difference ($\chi^2(1)=1.93$, $p=.17$). Among the informants that reported having had some form of preparation for teaching multilingual classes during their studies at University, most of them named preparatory courses for teaching Dutch as a second language. These teachers had been informed about second language acquisition and the difficulties involved in that, and on how to explain new words to second language learners. Besides this, informants mentioned traineeships in multilingual classes being required during their studies and a handbook for teaching multilingual classes being part of their required reading (Van de Laarschot, 1997). However, most of the teachers could not remember having received any preparation or reported not having had any preparation during their studies.

Support

Almost half of the teachers (49%) reported a need for support in order to handle the challenges involved in teaching multilingual classes. No differences were found with regard to gender, school type, subject, and experience (all $\chi^2<1.36$, $p>.24$). The support needed by the teachers covered the following three areas: working conditions, assistance, and materials. School type, school subject and work experience did not show any differences here (all $\chi^2<0.59$, $p>.74$), but an association with gender was found ($\chi^2(2)=6.29$, $p<.05$). Table 5 presents the distribution over the three areas of support in relation to gender.

Table 5. Support areas in relation to gender (in percentages)

	Men (n=54)	Women (n=58)	Over all (n=112)
Assistance	37.0	56.9	47.3
Working conditions	31.5	13.8	22.3
Materials	31.5	29.3	30.4

Women more often indicated that they valued assistance (57% versus 37%), whereas men attached more importance to working conditions (32% versus 14%). Materials were valued equally by male and female teachers.

Assistance

On average, almost half (47%) of the teachers considered assistance necessary. Assistance was either related to the whole school setting, to the classroom or to the individual student. With regard to the school setting, what was considered important was having a contact person at school for advice on problems related to multicultural